

The Road *More Differentiated*

A trip through Kansas provides a savvy business lesson.

Storeowners can take a cue from these towns' clever differentiation strategies.

If you've ever driven across Kansas, you know it's a long journey. My husband, John, and I recently had to make a trip from Colorado to Illinois, and we decided to drive. We knew the flat, golden land would stretch endless miles. And as we began, I found myself wanting to close my eyes and tap my ruby red slippers together three times, wishing for the trip to be over and us to be home.

Of course, I'm not the first who has felt this way about this particular drive. But luckily the people in the little towns along the interstate are fully aware of that fact and have gone to great lengths to make the traveler's trip somewhat interesting. Every few miles, you see colorful, engaging billboards announcing what makes each town unique in an effort to lure you off the interstate and into their communities. One exit boasts a former astronaut's hometown; another, which has a few palm trees planted about a gas-station yard, calls itself "The Oasis of the Prairie"; and yet another offers Wizard of Oz fans a museum dedicated to the famous book and movie.

All these towns are vying for your dollars, hoping you'll visit and spend your money. But no matter where you choose to make a pit stop, you'll find it isn't the product or stores that make the economic development efforts unique. Rather, it's in the

tourist attractions, museums, cultural centers or historical sites that draw passersby. And in a state in which nearly every exit looks the same, it's a strategy that's crucial to each community's survival.

Admittedly, we fell for one of these traps, pulling off at an exit after reading numerous billboards boasting the "largest prairie dog in the world." We quickly located the attraction, a dingy building manned by a salesman who greeted us with a cheerful, urgent cry to hurry so we could also watch an animal keeper feed five- and six-legged cows. ('Tis true; they have them there.) We quickly handed over a \$14 entry fee and rushed out to the stark-looking yard, speckled with caged, wild prairie animals, looking bored from their confines. The sight truly depressed me, so I pressed for us find the prairie dog and get out ASAP.

Finally, in the back of the animal yard, we saw it: a brown-and-white-painted, cement prairie dog standing 50 feet high on his hind legs. We posed, took a picture next to this ridiculous attraction, and laughed at our own stupidity as we left.

Ridiculous or not, this attraction had piqued our interest. So as we continued down the road, I paid even more attention to the billboards that struggled to win the attention of gullible travelers like us. I tuned in to what made

each of the interstate communities different and how they promoted themselves to travelers passing through the vast state. What did this say about each of these little towns? How did they compete?

These communities and towns know that just having a gas station isn't going to be enough to lure folks to their particular exit; they must have something distinctive to profit. And I have to give them credit. They've taken what they have – a flat landscape with few interesting landmarks – and learned to survive by using the strategy of differentiation. Since I had just finished editing our cover stories before taking off on this trip, I had to chuckle at the coincidence: This issue deals directly with the concept of differentiating yourself, and these Kansas communities had managed exactly that. I thought, "This state 'gets it!'"

In our industry, smart business owners can actually take a cue from these towns by seeking out what makes their stores unique and pursuing a differentiated approach. I have nothing against Kansas, but trust me: If this tactic works along this long, dull drive, it can work miracles in your business. So keep my road trip in mind as you read the tip-filled articles and strive to differentiate yourself from the other "towns" in this industry. ●



Katie Roberts
Managing Editor
kati Roberts@idcomm.com
970-668-9495